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The Asian Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica affinis* in Australia

by Richard Schodde

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Until 1977, the only form of the Gull-billed Tern known from Australia was the endemic, heavy-billed and whitish-backed subspecies, *Sterna nilotica macrotarsa* Gould (Peters 1934, Condon 1975). In that year Johnstone (1977) recorded the first specimen of the smaller, east Asian subspecies, *S. n. affinis* Horsfield. It was a bird collected from a group of four at the mouth of the Lawley River, Kimberley Division, in north-western Australia in mid-October 1976. Despite no confirmed records since (*cf.* McKean 1981), there are, however, two other concurrent records of single specimens taken on the estuaries of the East and South Alligator Rivers, Arnhem Land, in early February 1973 and early October 1974 respectively (Fig. 1). These specimens are lodged in the Australian National Wildlife Collection, CSIRO, Canberra.

Both are females in non-breeding plumage, with plain greyish-white crowns and lores (faintly shaft-streaked with black on the immature) and well-defined but narrow black lines through the eyes to over the ear coverts. One bird (5 February 1973) was adult with a convoluted oviduct, and fresh, moulting silvered remiges, and the other (10 October 1974) immature in apparently first-year non-breeding (winter) plumage with straight oviduct and worn, dusky remiges. Ovaries were regressed. The measurements of the specimens are, in mm: ANWC 6040 adult female—flattened wing 260 (in moult), tail 112, tarsus 31.3, exposed culmen 36.2, depth of bill at feather line 12.0; ANWC 17715 immature female—flattened wing 307, tail 122, tarsus 28.5, exposed culmen 36.7, depth of bill at feather line 10.2.

In comparison with endemic Australian *macrotarsa*, the two Alligator River specimens are paler on the crown and less streaked in non-breeding

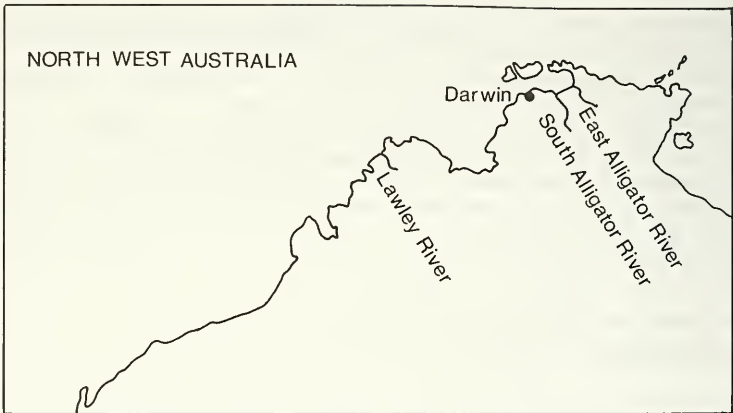


Figure 1. Localities for records of Asian Gull-billed Terns in Australia.

or immature plumage. Otherwise they match Asian *affinis* in their distinctly steel-grey dorsum and upper tails, small size, fine bills and short tarsi (cf. Roselaar in Cramp & Simmons 1975: 16–17). Based on 11 adult males and 10 females examined from Australian museums, *macrotarsa* is much paler whitish-grey over the back and wing coverts, almost snow-white on the tail, larger (flattened wing ♂♂ 304–344, ♀♀ 302–348 mm), heavier in bill (exposed culmen ♂♂ 42–47, ♀♀ 39–43 mm, depth of bills at feather line ♂♂ 12.8–15.0, ♀♀ 12.8–14.1 mm), and longer in foot (tarsus ♂♂ 34–38, ♀♀ 32–37 mm); cf. measurements of *affinis* and nominotypical *nilotica* given by Roselaar (*loc. cit.*).

These records and those of McKean (1981) lend support to the suggestion of Johnstone (1977) that *S.n. affinis* reaches the tidal waters and estuaries of northwestern Australia frequently during the austral summer. During a CSIRO faunal survey of the Alligator Rivers region between 1971 and 1974, small, white-crowned Gull-billed Terns matching *affinis* were recorded commonly between October and April, suggesting that it is a regular wintering migrant. The terns were solitary, quartering the saline or brackish lower estuaries of the Alligator Rivers up to 15 km inland and diving from great heights (often 100 m) to take small fish and crustacea. In contrast, endemic Australian *macrotarsa* also reaches the region on non-breeding dispersal but mainly though not exclusively in the intervening period, May–November (cf. McKean 1981). Around the Alligator Rivers it was found foraging only over freshwater swamps, billabongs and flooded plains further inland to take aquatic insects as much as fish and crustacea. Data on diet were gathered from the stomachs of collected specimens (2 *S.n. affinis*, 1 *S.n. macrotarsa*) and field observation.

Generic allocation follows Sibley & Monroe (1990).

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The generic status of Roberts' *Prinia* of the south-eastern Afrotropics

by P. A. Clancey

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In the course of dealing with the Afrotropical elements of the *Prinia* coterie of small long-tailed warblers, Hall & Moreau (1970) remark (on p. 175) that "a number of atypical species are currently included in the genus which so broaden the conception of it that it is difficult to name any character on which *Prinia* (*sensu lato*) may be distinguished from *Apalis*. . . Detailed study is called for as a basis for reconsidering the generic limits." Two of the forms singled out as atypical of *Prinia* spp. in general are southern African endemics, namely "*P.*" *substriata* and "*P.*" *robertsi*, distinguishable from current congeners in *Prinia* on the basis of their thin bills and widely differing tail-profiles. One of these atypical species has already been the subject of a detailed study, with the resultant placing of *substriata* in a new monotypic genus, *Phragmacia* (Brooke & Dean 1990; see also Clancey 1991). In the present study consideration is given to the second species concerned, *Prinia robertsi* Benson, 1946.

While initially described and currently treated as a species of *Prinia*, the generic status of Roberts' *Prinia* has for long been subject to doubt. It is a highly localized species, which affects edge situations on the outskirts of montane forest and clumps of bracken-briar at elevations of > 1200 m a.s.l. While occurring in pairs during the breeding season it is gregarious at other times, when feeding birds disposed at ground level in low screening cover will periodically join forces in giving voice to a collective churring chorus, reminiscent of the vocalization of some babblers *Turdoides* spp. Lacking distinctive field characters, it was for long confused with the Tawny-flanked *Prinia* *P. subflava*. Benson (1946a) noted that his new species *P. robertsi* had only 8 rectrices; this was later queried by Chapin (1946), who noted that in two specimens of *robertsi* presented to the American Museum of Natural History, New York, the species seemingly had a complement of 10 rectrices. In a recent note on the